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Abstract: Guided by empowerment and ecological theories, the Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) program facilitates character development through activities based in cultural differences, team building, and social change. This pilot study consisted of two focus groups (n = 13) of middle school youth conducted after their participation in an abbreviated version of the YES program. Specifically, the present study examined youth's cross-cultural perspectives after participation. The focus groups were transcribed and coded for emergent themes using Heaton's (2005) supplementary data analysis framework. Qualitative analysis resulted in two emergent themes: 1) enhanced appreciation for similarities and differences in cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and 2) the role of respect in understanding differences and confronting stereotypes. Specifically, youth reported that engagement in this program fostered positive awareness of cultural differences and respect for inter-ethnic relationships. The findings provide support for the benefits of the YES program on moral development and promotion of healthy peer relationships.

Introduction

Peer victimization in ethnically diverse schools is a topic of increasing concern (Bagci, Rutland, Kumashiro, Smith, & Blumberg, 2014; Vervoort, Scholte, & Overbeek, 2010). Early experiences of inter-ethnic bullying are likely to have negative implications for subsequent inter-ethnic relationships as these experiences often shape future prejudice and decrease social cohesion in ethnically diverse schools (Aberson & Gaffney, 2008; Pettigrew, 2008; Tolsma, van Deurzen, Stark, & Veenstra, 2013). Peer victimization in ethnically or racially diverse schools may be promoted by the ethnic composition of a school. For example, race or ethnicity can serve as a characteristic by which children identify peers that do not fit with the majority class at their

school (Jackson, Barth, Powell, & Lochman, 2006). Youth exposed to a small proportion of racial or ethnic similar peers at their school are at a higher risk for peer victimization compared to youth who attend schools with higher proportions of ethnically diverse youth among the general student body (Vervoort et al., 2010). As such, ethnic diversity in schools can have positive implications for many areas, from academic performance (e.g., Benner & Wang, 2014) to school safety and improved inter-ethnic relationships.

Research investigating these relationships has found that youth feel safer, less harassed, and less lonely when schools foster positive inter-ethnic relationships (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvenon, 2004; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). Moreover, positive inter-ethnic relationships can serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of perceived ethnic discrimination. Positive inter-ethnic friendships may function as a resource for youth to cope with stressful and negative intergroup experiences (Page-Gould, 2012). For example, research demonstrates that high quality, but not quantity, relationships are related to better psychological well being and resilience in ethnic minority youth (Bagci et al., 2014). Multi-ethnic contexts that foster positive inter-ethnic relationships can provide ethnic minority youth with beneficial social and moral outcomes (Killen, 2007).

One method to improve inter-ethnic relationships is through activities that target moral development. Based on social domain theory (Smetana, 2006), moral development involves the understanding of the difference between right and wrong within social encounters based on the principles of justice, fairness, and equality to improve the welfare of others. Facilitating opportunities for social interactions may help youth learn about fairness and justice, particularly as related to inter-ethnic relationships (Rutland & Killen, 2015). For example, prejudice may arise when differences between in-group and out-group identity become more apparent. In addition, limited experience with different ethnic minority groups may lead majority ethnic groups to rely on negative stereotypes and exclusive behaviors in social interactions with newly introduced or different ethnic groups (Hitti & Killen, 2015). Rutland and Killen (2015) advocate for effective interventions to enhance moral reasoning related to ethnic and cultural differences with school-aged youth to modify attitudes before they become ingrained in adulthood. Adults, such as parents or teachers, can facilitate moral reasoning through discussion about the rights and wrongs of behavior from a broader social framework (Nucci, 2001). Other interventions (e.g., intergroup contact, multicultural education) may promote thinking about similarities and differences among groups (Salzman & D'Andrea, 2001), as well as increased tolerance of diversity (Verkuyten, 2008).

Working in partnership with schools involved in a larger study, we initiated an after-school program to address inter-racial tension. Specifically, school administration at one of our partner schools identified on-going tension between African American and Latino youth within the student body. As a result of these concerns, we implemented an abbreviated version of the Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) program (Zimmerman, Stewart, Morrel-Samuels, & Reischl, 2011). YES is an after-school curriculum guided by empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000) and ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) theories and designed to promote positive youth development and prevent violence. Specifically, YES increases the capacity of youth to make constructive transformations within their communities (e.g., school, neighborhood) and culminates in a student-led community change project. In this research, youth participated in the first of six themed units, *Youth as Leaders*, which includes activities related to cultural heritage, team building, social change, and leadership skill development across nine weekly sessions. These sessions promote moral development through cooperative learning, moral dialogue, and discussion of social issues and practice, specifically related to culture. This pilot

study used focus groups to elicit thoughts about participation in the YES program and youth's cross-cultural perspectives. The current study's aim is to describe findings specific to thoughts pertaining to cross-cultural factors after participation in the YES program to understand how this program could improve ethnic relations within middle schools.

Method

Participants and Recruitment

Participants (n=13) were seventh- and eighth-grade youth from two urban middle schools in the Southeastern United States participating in a larger study evaluating the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus & Limber, 2007). Teachers nominated youth not identified as active school leaders but displaying potential leadership skills to participate in an abbreviated version of the YES program (Zimmerman et al., 2011), a component of the larger study. The YES program's goal was to develop leaders in their respective school communities, as well as providing after-school enrichment activities to contribute to a healthier school context. After school sessions occurred weekly for 9 weeks and lasted approximately 1.5 hours per session. Three to 8 individuals per school typically attended the sessions, and sessions were led by study staff assisted by one teacher from each school. Focus group participants were recruited from the larger group of youth (n=19) who attended at least three meetings. Recruitment occurred at the participants' respective middle school during school hours. Study staff distributed packets (i.e., a descriptive letter, consent and assent forms) for youth to take home and return. Demographic information, which was collected anonymously with the purpose of describing the composition of the focus groups, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Focus Group Demographics

	Group 1	Group 2
Youth	n=8	n=5
Sex (male)	63%	20%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	63%	40%
Latino/a	13%	20%
Multi-racial	13%	40%
Grade		
7th	25%	60%
8th	75%	40%
Facilitators	n=2	n=2
Sex (female)	100%	50%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	100%	50%
Latino/a	0%	50%
Racial Composition of School[1]		
Black	91%	70%
Hispanic	5%	22%
Other	5%	8%

Note: [1]Retrieved from the Virginia Department of Education website, 2015.

Procedure

One focus group was conducted at each school during after-school hours following completion of the YES program. Before each focus group, assent procedures were re-reviewed, specifically confidentiality, voluntary participation, and risks and benefits. The facilitators followed a script of open-ended questions to initiate and promote discussion. Only the questions related to cross-cultural perspectives were included in the current analyses (i.e., "What has participating in the leadership program taught you about your own or your classmates' or friends' ethnic or cultural background?"; "What has participating in the leadership program taught you about respecting your classmates', friends' or others' ethnic or cultural backgrounds?"). To facilitate discussion, a brief description of race, ethnicity, and culture was provided before discussion. Participants were compensated with a $10 gift card to a local retailer. Focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified by undergraduate research assistants. Names were changed to maintain confidentiality. This study was approved by the IRB at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Analysis

As the original intention of these focus groups was to elicit feedback on the YES program, transcripts were re-coded using a supplementary secondary data analysis framework (Heaton, 2005). This framework outlines steps for reworking qualitative data to extract new information from pre-existing qualitative data. This included an iterative process beginning with open coding by trained undergraduate research assistants (2 Latina females, 1 Caucasian male) for themes related to how YES participation affected youth's cross-cultural perspectives. After open coding, the coders discussed the themes, resulting in a final set defined in a coding manual. The last round of coding was completed with the finalized coding manual. Percentage agreement for codes ranged from 70-85% with the use of consensus coding to resolve discrepancies.

Results

Initial open coding produced nine sub-themes. Follow-up coding condensed these codes into two overarching themes and collapsed two sub-themes resulting in eight final sub-themes (see Table 2). The larger themes organized the sub-themes and better captured the strongest perspectives being communicated. These two themes were: 1) enhanced appreciation for similarities and differences in cultural and ethnic backgrounds and 2) the role of respect in understanding differences and confronting stereotypes.

Enhanced Appreciation for Similarities and Differences

Three subthemes emerged from this overarching theme (see Table 2). This theme captured the youth's interest in learning about their own and peers' cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Sub-theme 1). In particular, YES curriculum activities, such as discussion of social change movements and creation of cultural masks, were integral in sparking this interest. For example, one participant, Anna, said:

> I had learned certain things about African Americans that I didn't know before. Like their freedom bus rides. I didn't know about that. I didn't know that people were being killed and the bus was being lit on fire because of their skin color. So it opened a new eye, you know.

Youth also expressed that the YES program helped them develop interests in cultures besides their own. In describing a YES activity where youth created masks to celebrate their own cultural heritage after learning about the traditions of other cultures, Bob said:

> The time that we got to make our own mask, and before that they showed us

pictures of other masks from other cultures, so we could see what kind of like
mask that they used to celebrate from other cultures.

Youth also discussed interests in exposing themselves to new cultures, such as learning a new language or visiting other countries. In general, youth identified the activities and discussions specific to YES as increasing their interest in their own and others' cultural backgrounds.

Youth also described that learning about different cultures facilitated understanding of both similarities (Sub-theme 2) and differences (Sub-theme 3) among groups. One participant, Zoe described her view on similarities, specifically related to different races at her school:

> About different races at this school - just like torn between races. And I don't
> get it because basically we are all the same. We are all created the same, so
> I don't understand. What is the fuss about? So what? Our skin color is different?
> We were all made the same and we are all gonna grow up to be the same.

This quote, in particular, describes how youth may value an even playing field for all, regardless of race or background, on the basis of similarities shared as humans. In several instances and often in the same sentence, youth also acknowledged that even though cultures seem different, the basics (e.g., behavior, food) are built on similarities. Kelly stated, "I realized that different cultures may eat different things, but in some type of way, it's all the same, that what we eat like." Zoe also added, "Like even though we are different races, we do things that other cultures do." However, in many instances, youth did not provide more details, suggesting that perhaps their understanding of similarities and differences is superficial.

The Role of Respect in Understanding Differences and Confronting Stereotypes
Five subthemes emerged from this overarching theme (see Table 2). This theme captured the importance of respect for various groups (Sub-theme 1). For example, Chris said, "it does not matter where they are from, where they're from, or what kind of race they are, you should always respect where they come from and who they are as a person." In the other group, Anna described more specifically how respect is sometimes not shown:

> I had plenty of Hispanic and Latina friends and you know everybody thinks
> that they're from Mexico or they're called Mexicans. But, you know, people
> from Guatemala, El Salvador… I do understand why they get so offended when
> people keep on calling them that cause that's not, you know. I just find it very
> rude when people do that.

This quote provides an example of how interacting with others from a different culture enhanced understanding of respect and how youth may offend someone else without realizing it. In addition, youth expressed awareness that although issues between ethnicities in social contexts exist, it is important that these differences should not influence how one treats others, described as a belief in equality (Sub-theme 2). In a discussion of race at her school, Anna said:

> Right now there might be a little argument between two races at our school.
> But, you know, once you get to know them, each race, cause you know we're all,
> we're all different, but we're equal. That's how I see it. And that means that
> no one should get judged or picked on because of their race or skin color, you
> know. We all go to the same school, we all learn the same things, so there's no
> need for judging and bullying and picking on each other.

This quote is particularly important as the social climate at this school involved a known conflict between African American and Latino youth. The other group also expressed this, illustrated by two students who discussed treating everyone like you would treat those of your own race. This demonstrated that treating others the same regardless of one's race or culture is a basic way of showing respect. On the other hand, during discussion about what participation taught them about respecting other cultures, one group's consensus was that the YES program did not change their level of cross-cultural respect (Sub-theme 3). Several youth responded that they already knew to be respectful, one specifically saying, "that's why we were chosen for the leadership group."

Table 2
Sub-themes related to the overarching themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Description
Enhanced Appreciation for Similarities and Differences		
1	Interest in Learning	Interest in learning about cultural or ethnic backgrounds
2	Similarities	Increased awareness about shared similarities
3	Differences	Importance of learning about cultural/ethnic differences
Role of Respect in Understanding Differences and Confronting Stereotypes		
1	Importance of Respect	Understanding that different groups should be respected
2	Belief in Equality	Belief that differences should not influence treatment of others
3	No Change	Group participation did not change cross-cultural respect
4	Avoiding Judgment of Others	Importance of avoiding judgment based on differences and stereotypes
5	Think Before You Speak	Consideration of how one speaks will affect others

Youth also described the importance of avoiding judgment of others or thoughtless reactions based on cultural differences or stereotypes (Sub-theme 4). Youth described this as, "don't judge a book by its cover", indicating that you should get to know an individual and not rely on stereotypes. This was described by one participant, Zoe, "Just because a person is, may be one race, doesn't mean they have to act that particular race. They can act different kinds of ways." Expanding on this, Anna said, "There are many stereotypes that people believe and once you really know somebody you know, not everything that they say is true." The takeaway message, which was echoed by several participants, was to "think before you speak (Sub-theme 5)", implying that youth should be careful about comments they make to others who may be of a different race or culture because they may not be true if they solely rely on stereotypes.

Discussion

The present study aimed to identify how in engagement in an abbreviated version of the YES program influenced moral development through cross-cultural perspectives. Based on the focus group discussion, the activities in the YES curriculum enhanced cultural competence and promoted respect for ethnically diverse peers. Furthermore, based on comments from youth, the YES program helped them understand similarities and differences among cultures. Youth also described that participation produced positive awareness of cultural respect and belief in equality of ethnically diverse peers. Overall, youth expressed that participation helped them form positive perspectives on cultural diversity and competence. However, it should be noted that the consensus of one focus group was that participation did not improve their level of

respect because they felt they were chosen for the group for already demonstrating respectful attitudes.

Several aspects of the current project may have contributed to youth's positive responses. First, the diversity of the groups may have increased contact with youth from another racial or ethnic group, contributing to promotion of respect for ethnically diverse peers (Rutland & Killen, 2015). This is reflected in comments on not "judging a book by its cover" and is supported by research that suggests less prejudice by children with increased contact with others from different racial and ethnic groups (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). This finding is of particular importance as the ethnic composition of these schools was split between two ethnic groups, African American and Latinos. In addition, prior to the start of the YES program, one school (Group 2) had identified an on-going conflict between African American and Latino youth, with youth often relying on stereotypes or rumors to guide their interactions or opinions of the other group. However, participation in the YES program increased contact among these two groups with a goal to improve inter-ethnic relationships. The success with a small group of youth suggests that expanding the YES program to include more youth could be a good option for promoting inter-ethnic relationships at this school, and plans to expand to sixth grade students and a third school are in development. Further, this group as a mechanism to bring youth together may have promoted a common group identity beyond race and ethnicity, which has been shown to reduce bias against those from other ethnic groups (Cameron & Rutland, 2008).

The use of examples of historical racial discrimination in the YES program highlighted by youth (e.g., freedom bus rides) may have contributed to greater understanding of racial and ethnic differences and similarities. Research suggests that these activities can contribute to inclusive group norms while discouraging social exclusion (Rutland & Killen, 2015; Verkuyten, 2008). Furthermore, the findings are supported by social-domain theory, which suggests that the evaluation of exclusion may be dependent on positive intergroup peer experiences leading to decreased exclusive behaviors and increased moral reasoning (Killen, 2007).

This pilot study adopted a qualitative approach to understand how engagement in after-school programming influenced moral development in youth. While the youth in this sample suggested positive effects on cross-cultural perspectives after participation, the sample size was small and opinions were limited to youth in urban middle schools in one geographic region. However, these findings could be useful as a starting place for future research or program evaluation. Specifically, involvement fostered development of belief in equality and respect for different ethnicities and cultures during a developmental period when opinions regarding in-group and out-group differences may be particularly malleable (Rutland & Killen, 2015). The findings of the present study suggest that after-school programming, such as the YES program, may promote positive effects in cross-cultural perspectives through cultural activities and education.

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